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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 000125

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [AM](#)  
SUBJECT: ARMENIA'S SOUTH RELATIVELY QUIET BEFORE  
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

REF: YEREVAN 86

Classified By: CDA Joseph Pennington for reasons 1.4b and d.

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) Blanketed by feet of snow, residents of Armenia's southern regions of Syunik and Vayats Dzor seem more interested in their crops, the weather and even the U.S. presidential campaign than in their own presidential elections slated for February 19. Opposition activists are having trouble getting their word out for various reasons, chief amongst them the population's overall approval of Serzh Sargsian and the Republican party. With his roots in the south, Sargsian's ubiquitous visage may mirror his dominance in the hearts of voters or exacerbate what voters perceive is a lack of viable choices in the race. That Sargsian's opponents are putting up less of a fight in the sparsely populated south indicates they have larger fish to fry elsewhere. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Emboffs spent January 29-30 touring major population centers of Armenia's south. Harsh weather and road conditions precluded visits to the smaller villages that dot the many valleys in the high Zangezur mountain range.

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SISIAN: NOT MUCH EXCITEMENT  
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¶3. (C) TOWARDS LTP HQ: Pulling into Sisian, the northernmost town in Armenia's southernmost Syunik region, emboffs could not help but notice multiple copies of PM Serzh Sargsian's one election poster--in various sizes--on nearly every public building and street corner. It took a while to locate the campaign office for former president Levon Ter-Petrossian (LTP), but it revealed itself to be the only location in the general vicinity bedecked with its candidate's placards. While meeting with LTP representative Kamo Safrazyan, it soon became clear that LTP's campaign has spent less time and resources in the south of the country than elsewhere. While admitting that LTP has no particular promises to make to Syunik, Safrazyan said that LTP's campaign in Sisian and surrounding villages had distributed some 2,500 DVDs that contained footage of the former president's first three rallies in Yerevan so that citizens could see "what LTP could do for them." Asked how villagers and townsfolk had access to the technology to view the DVDs, Safrazyan spoke of groups of villagers congregating in neighbors' homes to watch the DVDs. He added that he had heard of several village heads secretly watching the videos in their own homes.

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14. (C) MAKING LEMONADE: Queried about reports that LTP's office in Syunik's capital, Kapan, had been shut down, Safrazyan confirmed them, stating that there had allegedly a rental dispute over the premises. He was quick to add, however, that this was an encouraging sign for LTP's supporters in Kapan, as they were now "on the street and doing work" outside of an office to get LTP's words out. Safrazyan also indicated that the opposition is not LTP's exclusive domain, stating that LTP supporters would go out to see any of the other opposition candidates were they to come through town.

15. (C) MEDIA COVERAGE: Speaking to the owner and news director of local TV station Vorotanyan Ghoghangner, emboffs learned that only the ruling party's candidate had approached the station to ask for specific advertising time. According to them, the opposition candidates did not attempt to buy airtime in order to "protect" the station from what had happened to GALA TV in Gyumri (see reftel). Nevertheless, LTP's supporters had requested that the station broadcast the candidate's DVD, though withdrew the request when the station offered to do so at a price of 2000 AMD/minute. The station owner, Araik Harutunyan, said he had been surprised about this since the price was less than was being offered by Yerevan stations for political advertising. Harutunyan reported that the station was broadcasting 45-minute documentaries that the AlPlus news outlet had produced on each of the candidates, and was reporting every candidate's rallies in their news bulletins. (NOTE: The station is known to be connected with Sisian's mayor, who, though nominally independent, often touts views of the Republican party. He is also known to have been at odds with Syunik's corrupt governor, and occasionally has asked the station to air various opposition programs--the AlPlus documentaries included--just to taunt him. END NOTE.)

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16. (C) MEDIA INSIGHT: Asked for expert analysis about how the elections might go in Syunik, Harutunyan pointed to the good work that Serzh Sargsian has done for the region as the singular factor that would translate into the PM's success in the South. He also mentioned the appeal that Artur Baghdasaryan has with youth and the permanent though minority representation that the Dashnaks and LTP's Armenian National Movement (ANM) have had in the region. With regard to vote buying, Harutunyan was convinced that the level of fraud seen in the parliamentary elections--the "best" he had seen--would not be prevalent in these elections because "they are seen as more important" and "most people like the Prime Minister." Talking about the level of excitement surrounding the election, Harutunyan quipped, "for (political) excitement, we watch your (i.e., U.S.) elections."

17. (C) ARTUR'S RALLY: Emboffs attended Orinats Yerkir candidate Artur Baghdasaryan's campaign rally in Sisian on January 30. No posters lined the route to the gathering, and emboffs took some pains asking people on the street if they knew where the event was taking place. Some 700 mostly young people crowded into the town's Soviet-era grand--though unheated--theatre to hear Baghdasaryan rant for nearly an hour--in subfreezing temperatures--about the problems and injustices of the current regime. Somewhat surprisingly, his diatribe was rarely interrupted by applause, and those present commented to emboffs that Baghdasaryan's populist rhetoric excluded concrete solutions for change. Another participant in her thirties questioned why Baghdasaryan was complaining about a government of which he was once a part. Tellingly, in a town with a population of around 17,000, the fact that so few supporters came to see a leading candidate for president revealed more about his popularity--or lack thereof--than anything else.

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GORIS: SOLID SERZH TERRITORY  
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18. (U) NGO CITY: Goris, Syunik's second largest city, is known for its tree-lined boulevards and its burgeoning and thriving civil society. Thanks to the efforts of USAID implementers, Goris has more NGOs effectively working in the city environs per capita than anywhere else. With unemployment in the town at close to 40 percent, these NGOs operate soup kitchens and shelters, employment centers and adult education classes. A significant few of them see their role as filling in for services that the local government cannot or will not provide. While the city's authorities have often found these NGOs more irritating and troublesome than helpful, the NGOs seem to have instilled a sense of accountability that is rarely found elsewhere in cities of this size in Armenia.

19. (C) OTHER CANDIDATES?: Leaders of some of the most influential Goris NGOs reported that it was clear that Serzh Sargsian was going to win in their region. Noting the fact that Sargsian calls Syunik home and that his brother is the elected National Assembly member for the district, NGO heads pointed to Sargsian's opponents as the real reason for his potential success in the south. According to these NGO representatives, Southern Armenians cannot see in Sargsian's rivals a real counterpoint to the PM. To this end, while the parliamentary elections were hotly disputed and election posters could be seen all over Goris last spring, the only poster to be found in Goris is the same Sargsian for President poster to be found everywhere else in the country. The NGOs bemoaned the fact that, particularly with their lackluster campaigning in the region, the opposition candidates do not represent a viable presidential alternative.

110. (C) WHERE'S THE MAYOR?: Goris Mayor Nelson Oskanian's office in City Hall stands in the middle of a handsome park, surrounded by two- and three-story buildings upon which now appears a collage of Serzh-Sargsian-for-President posters. For a pedestrian in the park, the sight can seem doubtless unnerving as Serzh Sargsians of various sizes, each with its own Mona Lisa smile, seem to be watching, not unlike Big Brother, the goings-on in the city center. However, Oskanian, to his credit, has taken a leave of absence from his job as mayor to lead Sargsian's presidential cause in Goris from a ramshackle building two blocks away. The chief reason why Goris will come out for Serzh, Oskanian claims, is that he has kept his promises--presumably about neighboring NK--to this region. That, the mayor says--in an apparent jab at LTP--is the sign of an experienced leader that Armenia needs.

111. (C) WHITHER "FORWARD ARMENIA": When asked to explain the PM's election slogan "Forward Armenia," Mayor Oskanian

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clarified the statement with an analogy. Even if one is to turn around to look at what has come before, he is still walking forward. In this way, Oskanian explained, Serzh Sargsian believes that Armenia should look to its youth to help it achieve its goals of bringing further prosperity to Armenians and of living at peace with its neighbors with open and secure borders. Oskanian admitted that change is necessary; corruption and his citizens, sad economic situation need to end. In his estimation, Serzh Sargsian is the only leader who can bring about these changes.

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VAYATS DZOR: ELECTION WITH LITTLE HYPE  
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112. (C) DASH-KNOCKING ON DOORS: Agrarian Vayats Dzor, the poorest and least populated of the country's regions, links Syunik to the rest of Armenia. Its capital, Yeghegnadzor, lying just off the main highway linking Yerevan with the south, is the prime location for candidates to stop on their way to and from Yerevan. There, emboffs met the local ARF-Dashnaktsutyun representatives to talk about Dashnak

candidate Vahan Hovhannisian's campaign in the region. Located in an office that has seen better days, Hovhannisian's campaign headquarters reflects the general state of the electoral environment in Yeghegnadzor according to Dashnak representatives: pretty quiet. The two representatives who run the office explained their campaign strategy; in lieu of posters or television ads, Dashnak supporters canvass door-to-door asking prospective voters to read Hovhannisian's platform and then sign an agreement to say that they have read it. Campaign workers contend that they do not intend to use these agreements for anything, but general apprehension to sign pieces of paper handed to them by strangers at the door has kept the number of voters who have signed these agreements low. Hovhannisian's supporters are also quick to clarify their party's relationship with--and to distance themselves from--the government. "We have three ministers," they explain, "but that does not mean we support the government."

¶13. (C) NOT REALLY INTO IT: At a roundtable of NGO and campaign representatives organized by the local office of USG assistance implementer NDI, all those present conceded that there had been a lot more enthusiasm about the parliamentary election campaign than the current one. While campaign leaders attributed this to fear, vote buying and fraud--which no one denied was occurring, especially on the village level--NGO representatives attributed the sense of malaise to the choice of candidates. Personalities matter in this race, one youth NGO representative said, and Serzh Sargsian seems to those with whom she works to be the "least unlikable." (NOTE: At a meeting in Yerevan on February 5, one of the OSCE-ODIHR long-term election monitors assigned to Vayats Dzor also attested to the low-key nature of the campaign in the region. END NOTE.)

¶14. (C) INTIMIDATION?: LTP representatives took the opportunity of the NDI-sponsored roundtable to report the forced closure of their office in Melishka, the largest village in the region, by the village authorities and offered this as proof of the government's intimidation of the opposition. While no one denied that such nefarious activity was going on, most of those present at the discussion agreed that these actions are the work of local chiefs who are trying to show their loyalty to the government by quashing opposition to it. The People's Party representative closed the meeting with a sentiment that was shared by all. "The people of Vayats Dzor are smart," he said, "These (village) authorities show less loyalty when they do such things. They should be serving the people and not just themselves."

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COMMENT  
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¶15. (C) The voters that turn out in Armenia's southernmost region will cast most of their ballots for Serzh Sargsian. The electorate knows this, the local officials know this and the opposition knows this. The latter's lack of vigorous campaigning in this region in part reflects the difficult working environment there but also emphasizes that they have better chances of changing many minds elsewhere. Nevertheless, the lack of enthusiasm for the election campaign in the south indicates a form of resignation that many have about the outcome of the election. They are placing their hopes in a Sargsian presidency to bring about the changes that southerners urgently desire. END COMMENT.  
PENNINGTON